

## Food Sovereignty movement and the women's struggles

**Ana Alvarenga de Castro**

*This article reflects on the current tendency in many peasant communities of more women taking responsibility for food production while still facing the lack of access to natural resources. The lack of land, food and of access to natural resources literally undermines women's (or other subjugated genders') autonomy. Not coincidentally, women in rural communities have usually taken leadership positions in political organization defending their livelihoods against land grabbing and environmental depletion caused by high polluting activities and performed by transnational corporations, as well as setting up self-organized groups fighting against gender violence and inequalities. They are juxtaposed to global developments of the patriarchal-capitalist rationality translated into neo-liberal approaches that is heading natural resources' and labor's exploitation, especially in the Global South, as a process of so called neo-extractivism (or neo-colonialism, in some points of views). The author concludes that it must be clear that women fight for their rights and autonomy in a society that tries to subjugate them, not because they are essentially connected to nature or are ready to serve the societies with their care and reproductive role.*

Food sovereignty's movements consider food sovereignty as a precondition to food security, speaking about the right of each nation to hold its own supply of foods that respects culture, sustainable practices and productive diversity. The conceptualization nowadays goes beyond national scopes, instead talking about other identities. It is a concept according to which farmers and consumers have rights to control the food systems considering local demands and equality in access to natural resources and quality food. Current feminization of agro-ecosystems and of food insecurity identified by grassroots and social movements and researchers, and recognized by international agencies, like UNESCO and FAO, has enhanced a feminist discourse into the food sovereignty movement, considering historical inequalities that place women farmers in subaltern positions not only inside families and communities but in the society in general.

For peasants' and indigenous movements, gender biases is an issue across the world, since women in rural areas are the most affected by hunger (FAO, 2014) and "perform 60% of the world's work, produce 50% of the food, earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the properties" (UNICEF, 2007). Struggles placed in the territories of local communities, nevertheless, are based on local conflicts rather than on general data. The lack of land, food and of access to natural resources literally undermines women's (or other subjugated genders') autonomy. Not coincidentally, women in rural communities have usually taken leadership positions in political organization defending their livelihoods against land grabbing and environmental depletion caused by high polluting activities, as well as setting up self-organized groups fighting against gender violence and inequalities.

Gender uneven conditions present in the majority of the territories are closely linked to a patriarchal-capitalist rationality translated into neo-liberal approaches which are heading natural resources' and labor's exploitation, especially in the so-called *Global South*, as a process of *neo-extractivism* (or *neo-*

*colonialism*, in some points of views). Feminist advocates have suggested an intersection between gender inequalities and global/local territorial inequalities in terms of the access and control of food and land. There is much evidence of this link: 1. women farmers face gender-related potentialities and limitations to reproduce diversified agro-ecosystems in tropical environments; 2. women are said to be the ones who hold knowledge about sustainable practices on land, seeds diversity, medicinal plants, food preparation and family's care; 3. at the same time that they have less legitimacy on production and economical activities, less participation on community and family decisions, and lack of land's ownership, professional recognition and subsidies and technical assistance for agriculture, being often submitted to men in these matters.

The current tendency in many peasant communities of more women taking responsibility for food production while still facing the lack of access to natural resources meets particular aspects in Latin America due to – and combined with local specific characteristics - the global economic logic which places the region in the position of raw material supplier for the industrialized world. In this context, Latin American countries play the role of commodities exporters in the international labor division, including among exported items: grains, soybean paste and ores. This is to the expense of local food chains that provide domestic quality food under more sustainable practices. Local food system usually promote fairer social relations, better control of food prices and quality by farmers and consumers, through reducing dependency on middle-men and big markets. Diversified agro-ecosystems enable more secure production because it is less dependent on one product's price and is more resilient<sup>1</sup> under different environmental conditions. Agroecological<sup>2</sup> techniques usually practiced by small-scale farmers allow more environmental friendly results, reducing costs and the use of external inputs – what decreases the farmers' dependency on commercial fertilizers and agrochemical products.

Silvia Federici, one exponent of the feminist thinking, asserts that the Price Revolution in the beginning of the 17th century is attributed to the gold and silver brought from America, combined with the prices' and wages' control by the ruling class in Europe and the State policies preventing workers' organization. According to the author of *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), this big shift led to the impoverishment and starvation of the working class, and particularly of the small farmers, “who had to give up their land to buy grain or bread when the harvests could not feed their families, and created a class of capitalist entrepreneurs, who accumulated fortunes by investing in agriculture and money-lending...” (Federici, 2004). This process affected more intensively women workers in the cities and countryside.

We can see the same logic nowadays in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund proceed with “structural adjustments”. In our times, though, these processes are inserted in a globalized reality that sets up ecological concerns in a planetary scope, leading to new discourses' disputes and localized and diverse conflicts which become worldwide visible. These disputes and conflicts become visible under uneven power relations, what keeps secular oppressions and inequalities very alive, particularly undermining women's entitlements, for example, the capability of having voice in decision-making on the territories.

It is not a coincidence that struggles led by peasant and indigenous women against land grabbing and high polluting activities in Latin America have been threatened by national and international forces. Food sovereignty as conceptualised by these movements proposes goals contrary to the trade's and financial markets' interests (which includes the “green economy”). And some women leaders argue with data that international agencies produce, which sometimes legitimate natural resources' and

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<sup>1</sup> Resilience is the capacity of returning to previous conditions after a disturbance.

<sup>2</sup> Agroecology is an academic concept to depict new agronomic knowledge based on diversified agriculture systems, sustainable land management, respect to cultures, fair trade chains and social justice (including the reduction of gender inequalities). Today it is being used by consumers, researchers and farmers (sometimes organized in social movements).

peoples' exploitation in traditional territories to provide industrialized goods to elites around the world:

“However, tragically, far from decreasing, poverty has increased in recent years in most countries. Studies of United Nations agencies and the World Bank, indicate that this situation is getting worse and the gap of wealth distribution has grown, confronting agricultural sectors with the cruel picture of increased poverty, in which women continue to suffer the more dramatic effects.” (Via Campesina, 2013)<sup>3</sup>

More and more, the peasant agenda seems to ideologically incorporate feminist perspectives, including the self-organization of political spaces:

“Our struggle and action for Food Sovereignty has given us, women, the opportunity to show our historical participation in the development of food systems in the world and the role we have played since the invention of agriculture, in collection and propagation of the seeds, in the protection and conservation of biodiversity and genetic resources, placing us as primary emotional, ethical and social pillars.” (Via Campesina, 2013)<sup>4</sup>

Feminist convictions in social movements are in many ways tied to the eco-feminism theory presented by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies. These authors point out that international guidelines and, among others, national legislations blame population growth and women fertility for the present environmental crises and poverty. Thus, they put economic rates of the countries' “use” of natural resources -which includes all sort of commodities for exportation (mostly by transnational corporations)- into an intern population account: “*La culpa de los males del planeta recae en las víctimas y, sobretudo, en las mujeres pobres*” (Mies and Shiva, 2002). The authors advocate that the international agencies do not question the patriarchal society and the economic growth model as root causes of environmental degradation. Policies are limited to an improvement in women's conditions and in education to avoid population growth, in a general manner. While those measures are implemented, social inequalities continue to grow.

Peasants' demands evidence a perverse inversion on hegemonic discourses about land and resources devastation as being caused by people, especially women, living in rural areas and directly dependent on these conditions and territories.

“The effective participation of women in the productive process, since the beginning of human construction of knowledge and practices related to agriculture, has always been essential to guarantee the continuity of human beings, in food production and in environmental conservation, as well as in ensuring an income and market opportunities, that is, in the maintenance of life. However, this participation throughout history was sidelined in the capitalist social organization we live in, which is oriented by a social logic twisted by the values that guide gender relations.” (MPA<sup>5</sup>, 2013, in free translation)

International agencies seem to look at the gender-overlooked issue as an important matter concerning natural resources' conservation. However their approach risks adopting a new “commodification of body” while appearing to be attentive to the claim for rights. In this way, UNEP<sup>6</sup> recognizes the women unique roles and perspectives built by the gendered division of labor in agriculture, stating:

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<sup>3</sup> IV Women's Assembly - Jakarta, June 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores*, the Brazilian Small Farmers Movement, is one of the peasant movements in the country, being the MST (Landless Rural Workers Movement) the biggest and most emblematic one.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (Integrating Gender in Ecosystem Management, 2016).

“Although women farmers currently account for 60-80 per cent of all food production in developing countries, gender often remains overlooked in decision-making on access to and the use of land, land rights, and biodiversity resources. Empowering women to participate as equals in decision-making will assist efforts in biodiversity conservation.”

To choose ways of achieving the participation of women in decisions and actions on food sovereignty is part of the women’s human rights and included in the local and international struggles for land and food access and control. It must be clear that women fight for their rights and autonomy in a society that tries to subjugate them, not because they are naturally connected to nature or are ready to serve the societies with their reproductive role.

I could not finish this text without recalling Lesbia Yaneth and Berta Cáceres, killed in June 2015 for fighting against a dam construction in the Gualcarque river, in Honduras, and Emilsen Manyoma Mosquera, who was fighting for human rights in *Valle del Cauca*, Colombia, killed in January 2017, as well as so many other brave women struggling in diverse territories. Following comes the speaks of one of those:

“Farmers from São João da Barra have cultivated food for several Brazilian regions, for all of us. One day, Porto Açu arrived, took the land, took the rights, and salinized the soil. It’s been five years of sadness, but also of learning to fight and resist.” (Noêmia Magalhães, 2014)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Extracted from a journalistic piece of Camila Nobrega, a reporter at National Meeting of Agroecologia, in Juazeiro, Bahia. Açu is the location of the mining system Minas-Rio’s port, in southeast Brazil.